

**“The Gap”** (Based on Romans 7:15-25a)

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Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace to you and peace to you. Happy 4<sup>th</sup> of July weekend. As Pr. Jim said last week: Let freedom ring, with Christ as our King. As we once again celebrate independence as a nation, this Sunday as Christians, Paul’s letter to the Romans forces us to consider one of our enduring captivities as humans. First, a story, which begins with my cell phone ringing on a mid-Monday morning off, last summer.

*Buzz.* It rang, forcing me to wipe my hands on the dishtowel and put down the breakfast pan I had been scouring, to get a look at the number popping up on my screen. A 612 area code? That wasn’t either of my siblings’ numbers. *Buzz.* My seminary friends’ names would have appeared with their numbers, wouldn’t they? *Buzz.* If St. Olaf College were calling that area code would be 507. *Buzz.* The only other possibility was... *Buzz.* My motivational wellness coach: Karen.

If I picked up, for the phone -appointment we had planned, Karen my coach, would inquire about my fitness and eating goals, post-baby. It was certain, she would ask me cheery and well-meaning questions: *How was it going with the more than one vegetable a day, Sarah? The working out, to the point of actually sweating, 3 times per week, Sarah? How did you feel about your level of wellness, Sarah?* I knew Karen would ask these questions because I could already feel the knot of guilt forming at how I would have to answer them, if I were honest.

*Buzz* went that 612 area code. *Click.* I did not take the call from coach Karen that day.

Hear again the words of Paul in the letter to the Romans: *I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate....I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.*

A current band, One Republic, in their song “Counting Stars” puts it another way: “I feel right, doing the wrong thing. I feel something so wrong, doing the right thing. Couldn’t lie, couldn’t lie, couldn’t lie—everything that kills me, makes me feel alive...Everything that drowns me, makes me want to fly.”

Artists sing about it. Marketers attempt to prey upon it. Neuroscientists study it. And in the first century already, the apostle Paul was trying to articulate a Christology which would overcome it: The Intent-behavior gap. On one side of the “gap” is a person’s intent: what they say they want (and what they even think they are doing); and on the other side of things, is their behavior (what people actually do).

I didn’t want to talk to Karen that Monday morning because my behavior had failed to live up to my good intentions to live a more healthy lifestyle at that point in my life. Thought I didn’t have the name for it, I knew the ‘intent-behavior’ gap intimately because I hung out there regularly--that no-zone between what one aspires do and what one actually end up doing. Perhaps you spend some time there, too? Have you ever found yourself saying something like: “This is going

to be the year we get our spending under control and give more to charity.” Or, “Starting next week, I am going to wake up, and kick the habit, for good this time.” Or, “Tomorrow, I will hold my tongue. I am not going to be short with her; or not going lash out at him; I will not disappoint them by my absence, again.”

The gap between “I will do it” and “I did it” is often left unbridged. The chasm between intent and behavior exists for all of us. Companies for years have been trying to help employees jump the gap for the sake of productivity. As proof, the internet is saturated with charts and power points used for what looked like company meetings/seminars, which look like ‘coach Karen’ herself could’ve drawn them! Functional MRI’s have opened up a realm called *neuromarketing* today—the study of how we make decisions at a cellular/chemical level. By my understanding, it is a way of eavesdropping on how the brain responds to advertisements, messages, and all sorts of sensory data.

Naomi Troni, writing for Forbes, “*We all know there’s usually a gap between what consumers say and what they really do. After all, we’re consumers, too, and we don’t always live up to our aspirations of eating more healthfully, exercising more, flossing, or putting away money for a rainy day. Across most areas of life, people know what they “should” aspire to, but they struggle to put it into practice. For every Jamie Oliver there are dozens of Paula Deens. Understanding what makes for this gap between intention and action is one of **the** most fertile areas for marketers.*<sup>i</sup>

Why are scientists, artists, and marketers all trying to unlock what it is about people, about all of us, that keeps our behavior from lining up with our ideals? 1) It effects and confounds all of us, the gap. 2) It has potential for great philanthropic or monetary gain—if you figured it out. 3) And, as the apostle Paul recognized, ‘the gap’ between our intention and action can and does cause ourselves and other’s harm on a regular basis. And that’s where God—who loves us too much to remain silent-- has something to say.

Through Paul, the gap is given a name: *Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. --But **sin** that dwells within me. **Evil** that lies close at hand.--*

Sin: that which falls short of God’s hope for us. Sin: the result of being free creatures—free to love God and this world, or the opposite. You could see this as an ancient cop-out for bad behavior: “It wasn’t me, doing it, it was the sin!

Let’s pause for a moment to reflect on who is it that wrote these words: Was it some seventeen year old, who had just wrecked their parent’s car, and claimed ‘it wasn’t me, pa’ we were just caught up in the moment!’ Was this written by the person who claims they were ‘overcome by something’ when they indulged in the shopping spree (to pale black Friday) or that binge on late at night sweets? *It wasn’t me, it was the sin!*

It’s important to remember, here was the Apostle Paul writing! Paul, prayed fervently, who worked mighty miracles, who wrote numerous letters to the churches. Here was Paul who spoke courageously before governments, kings, and rulers. Here was Paul who was tossed into prison,

beaten and stoned for his beliefs. Here was Paul, who lived and breathed the way of Jesus --yet confessing: "I don't get it. I do not get it. I do the things that I hate. And the very things that I want to do, I don't do. That which I don't want to do, I do. What is wrong with me? What is wrong?"<sup>ii</sup>

As we began worship in confession today: 'if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.' Whether we are Paul or the Pope himself, this bit from Romans gives voice to the struggle we all have within us, that is with sin.

Sin: the cause of the gap that has us *delight* in wrong, lack the motivation to do right and indeed, behave in a ways that outright drown us.

When Paul talks about sin, it's not just small 's' sin, as in personal acts of wrong doing. Sin for Paul is even more than the sum of human wrong-doing, systems of injustice which span the globe. When he speaks of sin, he speaks of Sin, a personified force at work in the world and in humans, whose power infects even those with the best intentions, like himself, like us.<sup>iii</sup>

Sin is a force --Paul argued--that could take even the most holy book, the Torah and its law, and have it twisted it into a weapon. It's the drive behind religious war and forced conversion--taking something beautiful like a spiritual belief and turning it into a battering ram. Sin is the driver that muddles the intentions of well-meaning people, causing us to hurt one another again and again. We in the 'land of the free' are captive to Sin, and we cannot free ourselves.

Such analysis of the human condition can come off as gloomy or outdated. Or, it can give us a potent word to describe an enduring reality. And, as when you are visiting your physician: when you have a diagnosis you can go about getting to the remedy. How can we--who seemed to be intent on living in the muck of sin--have any hope of living up to our better intentions and into God's dream for our lives? Or, as Paul put it: *Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? A: Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*

It is interesting that Paul asks *who* will set him free -- not *what* will set him free. It is not a *program* that will bring resolution; nor a set of facts from even the most sophisticated test that will bring about change, but rather a *person*. Jesus Christ. A risen, person, and power is the only thing that can take on another power, sin.

One definition of sin is separation. Separation from our good intentions and our ability to live them out; Separation from God's dream for us and our world, and our lived reality. It takes Christ's power to bridge the gap.

Sisters and brothers, in the face of your deepest and truest intentions. In light of what has been put in your heart to aspire towards, you can subscribe to the latest self-help blog or grit your teeth and by sheer stubbornness try to *do* it 'this time.' Or, you can lean into the power of the living God. Praying a simple, most powerful prayer, "Lord, help me."

Who will rescue us from the body of death? Thanks be to God for Christ. Who invites you to the table today, where we become what we eat: Broken, we become whole; less than we ought to be, we are filled; unable to bridge the gap between God's dream for us and our reality, strength.

Full aware of the gap in your life between good intentions and behavior, the sin, that yokes us all—hear Jesus words of invitation: *Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me... you will find rest for your souls.*

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<sup>i</sup> "Marketing the Gap between Intention and Action"

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/onmarketing/2012/07/17/marketing-the-gap-between-intention-and-action/2/> (accessed 7/2/14).

<sup>ii</sup> Paraphrased from Pr. Edward Marquart, "I don't do what I want to Do."

[http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/romans\\_idontdowhatiwant.htm](http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/romans_idontdowhatiwant.htm) (accessed 7/1/14).

<sup>iii</sup> Keck, Leander. The New Interpreters Bible, Vol. 8 "Matthew-Mark" (Abingdon, 1995).